

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES *Office of Children's Services*

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January 3, 2011

Susan Heuer, Chair
Citizen Review Panel
Office of Public Advocacy
900 W. 5th Avenue, Suite 525
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Dear Chair Heuer:

On behalf of the Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services, I want to thank you for your time and efforts during this past year. I appreciate the dedication and recognize the number of volunteer hours this work entails. I wish to thank each member of the panel for their continued commitment to helping OCS improve the child welfare system in Alaska.

If there are any questions or concerns that the following response brings up, please don't hesitate to contact me so that I may clarify or provide additional information to the panel.

I look forward to another year of productive partnership.

Sincerely,



Christy Lawton
Acting Director

Recommendation 1: That the discrepancy between rural, bush and urban child protection be acknowledged and addressed.

OCS has been implementing a state of the art practice model that ensures safety, permanency, and well being needs are accurately assessed and addressed throughout the life of a case. This practice model provides a foundation for the application of our guiding principles and values. These tenets are what we strive to abide by everyday in the interactions with families and the communities in which they live. This is the same whether that family resides in a rural, bush or urban area within Alaska. Five years ago the practice model was implemented to ensure that “safety is safety” regardless of where you live and that the prioritization and mandate to assure child safety within the appropriate timelines is paramount. Rural and bush staff are trained, supported in being efficient, resourceful, and creative when it comes to doing everything they can to establish safety. If that means chartering a plane, we charter a plane. If weather is prohibiting travel, we phone people in that community to work with them to help provide temporary oversight until OCS or AST can arrive. The expectation of the agency and rural staff is that they meet timelines as effectively as those in urban areas, and in some office areas, they in fact do a better job than offices on the road system.

Certainly, there have been cases when timeliness has been a problem due to staff shortages or prolonged weather delays. However, in the case of staff shortages we also have been implemented strategies whereby we have staff within other regions on standby to travel to outlying areas to assist with initiating protective services reports when we know that the local office will be unable to do so. Keeping staff in rural offices for any period of time is challenging for many reasons and we will continue to do our best to decrease the impact this has on the families we are responsible for serving. OCS operations although more standardized than ever before, do allow for the creativity and flexibility. We acknowledge that rural areas often need to accomplish the same job with slightly different methods.

“Currently any pilot programs or new trainings in OCS start in an urban area.” In the spring of 2010, OCS began a 3-part initiative designed to increase Internet and database performance in rural areas of Alaska. The initiative was piloted in Bethel.

Phase one of the project analyzed all conditions leading to the existing situation. Phase two improved the overall Internet speed for Bethel and surrounding communities. Phase three worked on improving database (ORCA) speed.

Total cost for the project was just under \$1 million dollars. While increasing Internet speed for all rural offices is cost prohibitive, OCS was able to implement a database enhancement that allows for faster data exchanges between rural offices and ORCA for nearly all offices suffering from slow Internet speeds. Those offices that have not received the enhancement will do so by no later than approximately April, 2011.

We certainly will keep this in mind for future possible projects ways we can pilot more, however, due to the staffing challenges many of these offices face they may not be the best testing ground for "pilot" projects. However, there are other ways in which we could engage and include them to be able to gain more input from the rural or bush office perspectives. We will strive to do that more diligently in the future.

Recommendation 2: That OCS front line workers have adequate support staff to allow them to focus on social worker, not paperwork.

The Office of Children's Services agrees that it would be advantageous to increase the number of support staff available to case-carrying field staff. An up-to-date workload study would be helpful in determining the number of additional staff required to increase the amount of time workers have to dedicate to child protective service field activities and the types of work that would be best done by support staff. However, we do recognize that much of the "paper work" done by workers is case management, not clerical work. Every line worker is aware of the need for complete and well-documented case work. Alaska's documentation requirements are federally mandated and in line with all state child protective service agencies nationwide.

OCS is also undertaking an in-house data study to examine caseload and resource distribution statewide to determine what positions might be available for relocation to areas of the state with a greater need. This study is necessary due to Alaska's zero net position growth policy. State agencies must give up an existing position for each new position created whether it is a new support staff position or a position in the newly created Western Region. This makes management decision-making contentious at best and places OCS management in a position whereby no answer is a good answer for all concerned parties.

"In May 2006 OCS received the report on workload study it had commissioned from outside consultants on front line workers' workloads. That report has been the basis for subsequent requests for additional positions and efforts to reduce caseloads to more manageable numbers. It provided data to help the agency move toward best practices for front line workers. We would like to see OCS commission a similar study for support staff to determine the best ratio of support staff to social workers. Currently, there is no figure used and the ratio varies considerably from office to office within the agency."

In the meantime, OCS has designed and is reviewing an internal workload report that examines the caseloads for all case management positions for all offices within OCS. The report utilizes caseload standards put forth by the CWLA. The report allows OCS to compare caseload demands for all offices and to recommend staffing adjustments.

This issue of clerical support and the need for admin support was also recognized by our supervisory strategic planning group. This group of approximately 20 supervisors statewide worked with the National Resource Center for Organization Improvement

(NRCOI) and the National Resource Center for Data and Technology (NRCDT). An outcome of this work was a strategic plan developed in partnership with OCS leadership to strengthen and enhance child welfare supervision in Alaska. Also on the plan to assess and evaluate are the issues surrounding clerical support. Leadership and the strategic planning group are committed to completing the strategic plan over the next two years. That plan is attached for your review.

Recommendation 3: That the training for new OCS workers be modified to better reflect the on-the-ground reality of the job.

As required by Alaska's federally mandated Program Improvement Plan (PIP), the Family & Youth Services Training Academy (FYSTA) recently updated its Standards, Knowledge and Insight Leading to Success (SKILS), new worker training to reflect technical assistance provided by the National Resource Centers for Child Protective Services and Permanency and Family Connections. A copy of the revised annotated agenda is attached for review.

In the past year, the OCS has focused all training efforts on improving quality caseworker visits, effective family engagement and accurate child safety decision making throughout the life of the family's case as required by the PIP. Training that addresses ethical issues related to boundaries and confidentiality, grief, loss and trauma, and consequences of children being removed from their homes/communities is included in SKILS. The OCS continues to work with our tribal partners on increasing staff's cultural competency and decreasing disproportionality through the Western Pacific Implementation Center Project with our federal partners.

Beginning in 2011, OCS will require each front line worker and supervisor to take a 4 hour online continuing education course through the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare to provide instruction about the impact of substance use disorders on children and family through the child welfare lens. The course not only focuses on the identification and effects of various substances, but also describes strategies that motivate parents to engage in treatment by working collaboratively with provider agencies to effectively case plan. See link: <http://www.ncsacw.samhsa.gov/> . Training regarding other behavioral health issues such as suicidality and specific mental health issues will need to be developed and coordinated with the Division of Behavioral Health.

OCS Deputy Director Tracy Spartz-Campbell has provided FYSTA with a 30+ hour adoption curriculum developed by the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption and discussion has begun to adapt the curriculum to meet the tribal, state and federal expectations. An advanced adoption training course is expected to be in place after July 2011.

OCS Acting Director Christy Lawton and FYSTA Training Director Tammy Sandoval also recently engaged in some early planning discussions about how FYSTA could assist in developing a series of on-line mini trainings. These trainings would be geared for those workers who have completed all the initial training and are seeking more training on specific topical subject matters such as: substance abuse, ethics, FASD, the cycle of grief, child development and the list could go on and on. The initial idea would be that these would be mini-trainings that they could complete while sitting at their own computers that could be short in duration. If FYSTA and OCS were able to be creative about funding and develop such a resource the training could be available statewide to our staff as well as possible with our division partners within DHSS would be endless. Again, this is only in the early brainstorming phase but is an idea worth noting as it has great possibilities for success.

Lastly, a steering committee has formed between Child Advocacy Centers, local multi-disciplinary teams, law enforcement and OCS/FYSTA to review and revise its training methods and protocols regarding child forensic interviewing statewide to better equip practitioners to investigate the sexual abuse of minors.

While OCS recognizes the need to provide all the suggested areas of training, priorities had to be made based on federal requirements, funding to send workers to training and coverage in offices when there are worker absences.